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JCS PASS J-5/CDR S. WRIGHT

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2008

In Today's Papers

Turban Debate Intensifies with Party Leaders' Criticisms

All papers carry Prime Minister Erdogan's harsh criticisms against the media and Deniz Baykal, leader of Turkey's main political opposition party. In response, Baykal called the ruling AKP's efforts to change the constitution an "assault on the republic." Erdogan lashed out at the media for "exaggerating the confusion" over turban reforms, which were passed by the ruling AKP and the right-wing nationalist MHP. Erdogan said "some media groups" were trying to portray Turkey as a country divided into two hostile groups. He particularly targeted the Dogan Media Group saying that the tense headlines in the group's papers were actually efforts to manipulate the issue. "Their concern is not democracy, but fears that their interests could be harmed," Erdogan said. The PM also responded to CHP leader Deniz Baykal for saying the AKP leaders should be ready to "face the gallows" over their efforts to reform the constitution. "What kind of democrat are you, suggesting we are headed to the gallows? We have been wearing white robes and are ready to pay the price for our actions," stressed an angry Erdogan. Papers infer Erdogan is referring to the traditional white shrouds used in Muslim burials.

Opposition CHP leader Deniz Baykal told his party group meeting yesterday, "You can put a headscarf on a person but you cannot put it on the state," adding it was not proper to place "an Islamic tradition" in the Turkish Constitution. Baykal also responded to Erdogan's harsh remarks, "Don't wear the white robe -- we don't want to see you in robes or chadors, but as a respected, law abiding prime minister who suits modern Turkey." Baykal noted his party's efforts were aimed at the elimination of the AKP at the ballot box.

Opposition MHP leader Devlet Bahceli told his deputies that MHP was seeking "moral satisfaction" and not political gains on the headscarf issue. "The use of headscarf as an ideological symbol against the regime in Turkey cannot be tolerated," Bahceli

emphasized. Bahceli added "if we are going to prevent veils or burgas in universities, it is mandatory to make adjustments to article 17 of higher education law."

Meanwhile, the pro-Kurdish DTP lawmaker Ahmet Turk urged the government to seek consensus for the democratization of the constitution. He expressed disappointment that the government made no effort regarding "the rights of the Kurds and minorities" in Turkey while working to amend the constitution.

On Tuesday, groups of students gathered in university campuses in Izmir, Kocaeli, Adana, and Mersin to protest against the AKP-MHP turban proposal, shouting slogans "Turkey is secular and will remain secular." The students issued a statement criticizing "certain circles" for trying to polarize the country.

Editorial Commentary on Turban Debates

Left-leaning Taraf's chief editor Ahmet Altan writes (2/13): "Additional provocation during the current headscarf controversy is dangerous. The ruling AKP must take the lead to end the hostility. The only thing the AKP can do now is to take determined steps forward regarding Turkey's EU-related reforms. Such efforts would relieve doubts among the AKP's adversaries. This is the only way to alleviate the possibility that Turkey could turn into a hell-like inferno because of provocative attacks. Some still want to incite clashes in universities, launch bomb attacks, and plot political assassinations. For the liberation of us all, the AKP has to become the party of "liberation." The fact that our lives depend on such a condition is also distressing."

Abdulhamit Bilici observes in the Islamist-oriented Zaman (2/13): "It's not fair to claim that Prime Minister Erdogan's priority is to "Islamicize" Turkey by removing the ban on turban in a country where

ANKARA 00000273 002 OF 003

almost 80 percent of its people support headscarf freedom. International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch deem the turban ban in Turkish universities a violation of human rights; these organizations support its removal. Newsweek, also, sees the AKP's turban initiative as a move toward liberation, underlining that it stands closer to the freedom of religion in the western sense that what AKP adversaries want. However, this is a test for Erdogan. Will he pass more EU reforms or will he merely comply with the demands of the AKP's grassroots' support?"

Barak in Turkey to Sell Israeli Missile, Satellite Systems

All papers report visiting Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak met yesterday with Prime Minister Erdogan and Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul. Papers highlight that Barak wanted to sell Turkey missile defense and satellite systems after the high-level Israeli delegation came to lobby for the sale of Arrow missile systems and Ofek spy satellites. Mainstream tabloid Aksam says Turkey will buy ten Heron unmanned spy aircraft from Israel. Barak and his Turkish counterpart Gonul signed a 15-part military agreement, but details of the agreement were not released. Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak and Zaman as well mainstream papers report Erdogan asked Barak to stop Israeli attacks against Gaza and end the blockade on the region. "We are exerting great efforts for Israel and Palestine to live in peace side by side. We thank Israel for its support to Turkey's defense industry, and also thank Mr. Barak for sending equipment that Turkey can use in the southeast and in cross border operations," Gonul stressed. Barak also met with Foreign Minister Ali Babacan later in the day in a meeting closed to the press.

Urbancic on the PKK

Hurriyet, Cumhuriyet and Zaman report Deputy Coordinator for Counter Terrorism, Frank Urbancic, told journalists at a roundtable Tuesday the US would apply the "Al Capone model" in fighting against the PKK presence in European countries. Urbancic said, despite all of Al Capone's known criminal activities, authorities in the US could only arrest him over a tax offense. Urbancic said the US would use the same method against the PKK. "The PKK works like the Mafia in Europe -- they fundraise in Belgium, operate television broadcasts in Denmark, where free speech is deemed essential, and they're involved in money laundering and drug trafficking across Europe.

Urbancic emphasized, "The PKK terrorist organization in Europe is like an octopus."

TV Highlights
NTV

Domestic News

- Energy Minister Hilmi Guler said a regulation on building nuclear plants in Turkey has been submitted to the Council of Ministers for approval.
- The pro-Kurdish DTP branch head in Batman, Ozcan Erdem, and two other local party officials have been arrested for possessing outlawed documents.
- Police have arrested on Tuesday four suspects in Istanbul for burning cars.

International News

- Erwin Huber, the head of Bavaria's conservative Christian Social Union, accused PM Erdogan of "preaching Turkish nationalism on German soil," stressing "That is anti-European and confirms our misgivings regarding Turkish EU membership."
- Ahead of the declaration of Kosovo independence on February 17, the EU is expected to authorize a "security and justice" force for Kosovo this week.

ANKARA 00000273 003 OF 003

- Israel announced plans Tuesday to build more than 1000 homes in disputed east Jerusalem, in a new move which may harm efforts toward peace.

WILSON